

Applied Drama – A Resource for Sustainability Teaching in Higher Education

Goal 4

Goal 12

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Education for Sustainability – High Expectations and Huge Challenges

A strong emphasis and high expectations on education to deliver a large-scale impact on transformation towards sustainability has been present at least since UNESCO declared the UN decade of education for sustainable development (2005-2014). This key role for education is also reflected in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

The Sustainable Development Goal 4 concerns quality education and lifelong learning for all. SDG 4.7 aims to “ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development...”. Goal 12 concerns consumption and production, and SDG 12.8 sets out to “ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature”. Goal 13 about taking action to combat climate change, also puts education at the front. SDG 13.3 “Build knowledge and capacity to meet climate change” states the need to “Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity...”. The approach is wide, including learners at all levels of the educational system, as well as ‘people everywhere’ and human and institutional capacity. It becomes clear that knowledge is not enough, there is a need for *raised awareness, skills*, and ability to *take action* to combat climate change and create *lifestyles* in harmony with nature – based on knowledge. But the educational sector does not seem to meet the high expectations, as education needs to be ‘improved’.

This paper focus on sustainability teaching in Higher Education. As time is crucial, there is an urgency to implement change (e.g. lowering CO₂-emissions). Thus, it is a strategic choice to target university students as in a few years they will be in positions where they can make a difference. Research on teaching for sustainability at primary and secondary levels has evolved significantly over the years while tertiary level has received less attention. University teachers have been described as ‘left in the dark’, which is highly problematic.

Sustainability teaching can be challenging at all levels of education but in Higher Education the challenge is huge for at least three reasons. Teaching for sustainability starts in the scientifically based evidence for un-sustainable patterns of production and consumption, and the obvious need to reduce emissions, protect bio-diversity, and fight global warming. As the current development is not in line with science, there is an

inbuild emotional, even *existential dimension* of the topic, causing *climate anxiety* (Schwartz et al. 2023), which makes it unique as learning content in HE. Sustainability issues are also *transdisciplinary* and characterized by *wicked problems* (Ramaley, 2014); highly complex and entangled, full of dilemmas and value conflicts, which is unusual in HE. And last but not least, pure academic knowledge is not enough, at least not for adult learners. There is an *imperative* to transform knowledge into changed behavior – to *take action* (SDG 13). All these aspects considerably deviate from traditional teaching and learning in Higher Education. Non-traditional learning content calls for non-traditional teaching formats such as interactive teaching, thought-provoking discussions and collaborative activities, according to students (Lansbury et al. 2023).

Lack of sustainability can be described as a result of alienation, for example between body and mind, human and nature (Lehtonen et al 2020). One way to tackle such alienation is by “connective aesthetics” (Gallagher & Balt, 2025 p. 9). The European Union’s framework of green competences, GreenComp includes four areas; *Embodying* sustainability values, *Embracing* sustainability in complexity, *Envisioning* sustainable futures, and *Acting* for sustainability. These competences can easily be connected to Applied Drama work, as an example of connective aesthetics and one possible response to the educational challenge of teaching for sustainability (Wall et al. 2025).

Applied Drama – A resource for creative teaching

Applied Drama, or just drama, is an educational approach based on collective creative work with fictive scenarios at its core, characterised by playful interaction followed by reflection. Drama work includes occasional activities like icebreakers, and more elaborated formats like role play, forum play, process drama, provocative performance and legislative theatre.

Stepping into drama work; a playful ice-breaker or role taking in a complex fictive scenario, enables emotional engagement and offers possibilities to take action, since role taking per se is an imperative to act. The advantage of working with fictive situations is that it provides a safe way to try out different solutions. It is possible to step out of the situation and reflect on what happened, and try again in another way. The teacher can feed in knowledge to challenge the students or help them to make more informed choices. Even if the situation is fictive, the emotions experienced in role are real. This can be empowering and is a way to deal with the existential dimension of sustainability. Another aspect is that drama itself is a collective art form that creates joint experiences and generates increased agency, which may contribute to taking action. Playfulness has to be at the center of drama work for this to happen. It is of great importance for

improvisation, which in turn is vital for envisioning sustainable futures. By working in this interactive, creative way participants develop a certain form of agency based on expectations and hope, *expectagency*, a capability to handle uncertainty and change together (Hallgren, 2022).

If applied drama holds this potential, how can it become available for university teachers in various disciplines with no previous experience of drama? To explore this an international project with university scholars took place during 2022-2023.^[1] The 16 scholars from 8 countries represented various disciplines; Applied Drama, Applied Ecology, Creative Practice, Economy, Education, Health and Society, Management, Media and Communication, Political Science, Science Education, and Sustainability Science. The project design involved the invited scholars to participate in several drama workshops over four days and then plan, apply and evaluate what they found useful in their own teaching. Two digital events were offered after the on-site-workshop, for new input and tutorial. A second meeting in person aimed at creating a pool of data, sharing teaching experiences and discuss learning outcomes from a student perspective. A third event focused on comparative analysis, co-writing, and praxis development through peer-tutorials.

Until now, late 2025, nearly 3.500 students in HE have experienced applied drama and/or provocative performance as a result of the project. This outcome clearly indicates that a) the participating teachers had a strong desire to develop their own teaching and b) teaching formats like applied drama and performance are meaningful and useful for sustainability teaching in various academic disciplines. The level of implementation demonstrates the wide applicability of the range of methods available through drama and performance. Icebreakers through drama, for example, can be easily implemented with minimal preparation. Similarly, some performance work can be applied within minutes and generate significant material of pedagogic value. In both cases, the reactions of students within the class may provide real and immediate information that can be explored for authentic learning and reflection related to sustainability behaviours.

Another outcome is a handbook (Wall, Österlind & Hallgren, 2025) written by drama experts and those new to drama and performance. It covers a range of drama forms from ice-breakers to more complex and sustained formats. The chapters share not only the step by step instructions of how to implement a method, but also shares the learning associated with implementing the methods. This rich additional information highlights some of the experiences of the teachers when adopting drama and performance. For example, the practical elements not necessarily thought of before implementation, as well as reflections on how well the students engaged in the methods. For those new to using drama and performance, these reflections often highlight how positive the students were – despite the teacher's prior assumptions of

their supposedly likely skepticism. Every chapter is based on drama interventions completed during the project and connected to specific SDGs and EU's GreenComp. This enables the reader to find out how their own teaching can be inspired by different forms of applied drama, as well as linked to sustainability goals and competences.

References

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